

The Use of Causal Dynamics: High Effort, High Reward?

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Key Words

Freelisting, Pile Sorting, Causal Dynamics, Forum, Organizational Development, Workplace Engagement, Civic Engagement, Community Engagement, Social Services, Consulting, Canada, Seniors,

Context

- The Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council was set up in 2003 to provide leadership on seniors' issues and to facilitate shared planning and coordination among organizations serving seniors.
- The Council now has 39 members representing non-profit agencies, as well as associated members from groups like health authority programs, local colleges, and municipal services.
- Local SAS² practitioners offered to assist the council and, at the same time, to practice some SAS² techniques during the spring and summer of 2008.

Research Questions

- *What are the most significant issues that the Council will need to address in the next two years?*
- *Why has it proven difficult for the Council to increase opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among member organizations?*

Participants

- 28 representatives of Council members, including professional staff and volunteers board members.
- 4 representatives of health programs.



Techniques

- Freelisting and Pile sorting
- Causal Dynamics

Results

The most significant issues identified by **Freelisting** and **Pile sorting** were:

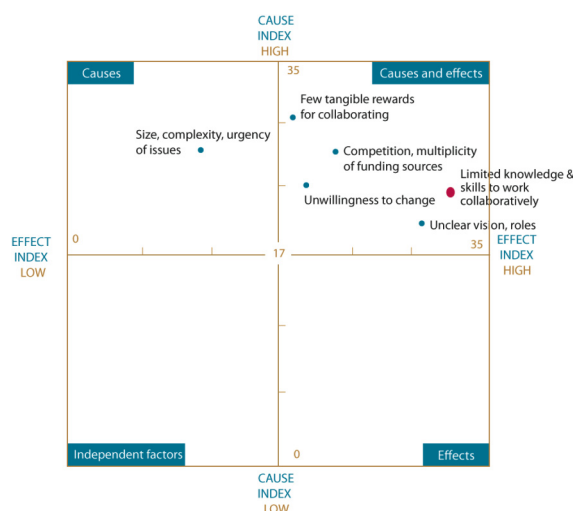
The need for agencies to work together to improve services

- Providing reliable transportation for seniors
- Integrating newcomers and ethnic groups
- Affordable housing for seniors

Difficulty of increasing opportunities for cooperation and collaboration

- Lack of tangible rewards for collaboration
- Size, complexity, and urgency of issues
- Competition for a variety of funding sources
- Lack of knowledge, skills to work collaboratively
- Lack of vision, role clarity, decision-making and planning
- Unwillingness to change, the “naysayers”

The interaction of causes of the difficulty of increasing opportunities for cooperation and collaboration was assessed using **Causal Dynamics** (Table 1). When participants discussed the findings, they agreed that with the exception of one cause (size, complexity and urgency of issues) all other causes were closely linked (Figure 1). The question then was, given limited time and resources, where should the coordinating council begin its process for *increasing opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among member organizations?*



	Lack of tangible rewards for collaboration	Size, complexity & urgency of issues	Competition & multiplicity of funding sources & requirements	Lack of knowledge, skills to work collaboratively	Lack of vision, role clarity, decision making & planning	Unwillingness to change, naysayers	CAUSE INDEX
Lack of tangible rewards for collaboration		7	7	6	7	7	34/35 6.8
Size, complexity & urgency of issues	3		7	7	7	2	26/35 5.2
Competition & multiplicity of funding sources & requirements	6	6		5	7	4	28/35 5.6
Lack of knowledge, skills to work collaboratively	1	1	7		6	7	23/35 4.6
Lack of vision, role clarity, decision making & planning	6.5	2	1	6		6.5	22/35 4.4
Unwillingness to change, naysayers	6	1.5	2.5	7	6		23/35 4.6
EFFECT INDEX	22.5/35 4.5	17.5/35 3.5	24.5/35 4.9	31/35 6.2	33/35 6.6	26.5/35 5.3	156/210

Outcomes

Three small groups were formed to reflect upon the findings, discuss potential barriers, and develop the recommendations:

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1. Begin a facilitated process for establishing a common vision for the delivery of services to seniors across the city.
 2. As an early step in the planning process, develop an inventory of the "passions and capacities" of all member organizations.
 3. Get the "best bang" for the Council's efforts by establishing an Action Committee to demonstrate tangible results.
 4. Rearticulate the Council's plan, role, and history by being specific about what is asked and expected of each Council member.
 5. Allow Member agencies to drive the priorities and action of the Council more.
 6. State the existing vision more succinctly and use creative ways to communicate it so the message is understood.

An Action Committee was formed at the end of the workshop. It has continued to meet to work on the recommendations and it will soon announce a major planning initiative with the members of the coordinating council.

Contributions of SAS²

The participants' viewpoint...

- Free listing, pile sorting, and ranking engaged participants
- The central question for Causal Dynamics was deemed to be accurate and the listing of possible "causes" was energizing
- People felt anxious about whether the selected causes were clear and mutually exclusive
- The explanation of the 1 to 7 ranking on the matrix was "baffling" and people often questioned how relevant the exercise was in examining the impact of one selected cause upon all other causes
- With 3.5 hours set aside for the work, people felt rushed
- Participants acknowledged that Casual Dynamics helped them to explore the underlying causes in a very different way
- Most participants thought that Figure 1 had been helpful in stimulating meaningful discussion and they were pleased with the recommended actions that were proposed
- Participants report that the work of the Action Committee has continued to be more productive as a result of the workshop

The facilitators' viewpoint...

- Too little time (3.5 hours) was set aside to use the techniques, and facilitators felt rushed
- We learned that to do the technique well, more than one facilitator was needed

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- The lead facilitator had trouble explaining the nature and purpose of Causal Dynamics and being clear about the distinction between “cause” and “effect”

What might have made the experience more rewarding?

- Improve abilities of facilitators to assess whether the use of Causal Dynamics, or modifications of the technique, are appropriate for the context.
- Allow enough time for the process, or modifying the technique to better suit the time that was available.
- Have metaphors available to help participants understand the nature of the exercise and the possible benefits (for example, the metaphor of “a pool table shot,” where you decide to hit a particular ball that will in turn strike others and thereby maximize the impact).
- Give workshop participants a few good examples of how a cause or an effect might be generated so that the dynamics were more quickly understood.
- “Hiding” the technique could be considered; this would avoid the need for long explanations.